SUBVERTING SCOTLAND'S PAST

Scottish whig historians and the creation of an Anglo-British identity, 1689–c. 1830

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This study considers the origins of some of the puzzling features of national identity in modern Britain. Prominent among these is the failure of almost three centuries of Anglo-Scottish union to generate a comprehensively 'British' conception of national identity. Instead, in its political manifestations, 'Britishness' is Anglo-British, dependent on a historical allegiance to England's evolving constitution of crown and parliament. Outside Ireland, this 'whig' self-image has proved remarkably durable, enthralling even socialists, whose curious lack of hostility to the monarchy the Marxist-nationalist revisionist Tom Nairn has attributed to acquiescence in the English constitutional model of the seventeenth century and the avoidance of a modern nationalist-republican revolution of the French type.[1]

Anglo-Britishness is almost as pervasive in Scotland as in the English heartland of the United Kingdom. This ready acceptance of English ideals in Scottish political culture is almost certainly connected to an ideological non-occurrence in Scotland's modern history whose causes pose a second historical problem for this study. During the nineteenth century, the Scots, unlike the Irish, Italians, Hungarians, Poles and most of the other historic nations of Europe who, at that stage, lacked full political autonomy, missed out on the development of a full-blown 'romantic' nationalism. A retarded nationalist movement did develop in the second half of this century, but remains the party of a minority.

Nairn has investigated this problem via the socioeconomic perspective afforded by the modernisation theories of Ernest Gellner. Gellner interprets nationalism as a modern phenomenon

[1] T. Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass* (London, 1988).

arising out of the impact on traditional cultures of industrialisation and the attendant state-sponsored mobilisation of the infrastructure, including the provision of a basic schooling in numeracy and literacy. This raised cultural particularism to the forefront of political debate, especially where composite states such as the Habsburg Empire mobilised their economies by attempting to impose the language of the centre on ethnic peripheries; these had been accustomed to accepting dynastic rule from the centre on the basis of local cultural autonomy. Nairn has argued that Scotland was part of the core of industrialisation, and shared in the profits distributed at the centre of Britain's colonial Empire. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Scotland's union with England established Scotland at the core both of the British Empire, and, as part of the world's first industrial nation, of the world economy. During the era of romantic European nationalisms, most Scots, seduced by a cornucopia of commercial opportunities and imperial offices, remained firmly wedded to Union. Nairn's explanation of the rise of Scotland's modern neo-nationalism rests on the loss of Empire and British industrial decline. This transformed Scotland from an imperial core and vital province at the heart of a leading economy to a British periphery, but a Scotland whose oil raised the prospect that future uneven development within the United Kingdom might take the form of Scottish out-performance of a sluggish, declining English economy. This dramatic change in Scotland's economic status and prospects provoked from the 1970s a neo-nationalist response.[2]

A major problem with Nairn's application of Gellner's model of nationalism to the experience of Scotland is that the Gellner thesis deals specifically with linguistic differences as a source of friction. In the linguistic patchwork of central and eastern Europe, language was critical, during the nineteenth-century

[2] T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London, 1977); E. Gellner, *Thought and Change* (1964: London, 1972), pp. 147–78; Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); see also T. C. Smout, 'Problems of Nationalism, Identity and Improvement in Later Eighteenth-Century Scotland', in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Improvement and Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 1–21. M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (London, 1975) is less plausible than Nairn's work as an attempt to relate nationalism in Britain to uneven economic development. For the debate about the causes of Scottish neo-nationalism, see K. Webb, *The Growth of Nationalism in Scotland* (1977: Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 102–38.

experience of modernisation and industrialisation, in determining access to careers. Language was not as central to conceptions of Scottish identity. Scots, a close dialect cousin of English, although proving a provincial embarrassment to Scotsmen seeking metropolitan advancement in the post-Union state, was nevertheless no bar to a successful career. Scotsmen on the make took advantage of elocution lessons to mellow their accents, and studied dictionaries of Scotticisms, words and expressions which jarred on English ears, to expunge these from their conversation and writings. Scots was largely an irrelevance in the socioeconomic sphere, though it remained important as a badge of cultural identity. The literary revivals of the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries were not, unlike the folkloric and philological movements of many other European nationalisms, sustained by political grievances stemming from economic discrimination on the basis of language.[3] Moreover, Gaelic had become detached from Scottish nationhood during the middle ages, with the kingdom's centre of political gravity moving south to the Lowlands. During the seventeenth century, both crown and Kirk of the independent Scottish state had been committed to the extirpation of Gaelic as an Irish and popish tongue. The presbyterian position changed only from 1766, as a result of problems in creating a literate presbyterian community in the Highlands while at the same time attempting to extinguish Gaelic, the most appropriate missionary tool. However, Gaelic was to remain peripheral to questions of Scottish identity.[4]

Nairn's materialist thesis is not crudely reductionist. He does not ignore the ideological and cultural context of Scottish and British national identities, but he makes assumptions about political culture which warrant examination. Nairn argues that, despite the shared language with England, nineteenth-century Scotland had, on the surface, a suitable foundation on which to build a nationalist movement. He singled out Scotland's lively historical culture as a vital resource on which hypothetical Scottish nationalists might have drawn: 'Nationalism involves the

[3] D. Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth-Century Experience* (London, 1964), pp. 11–35; Daiches, *Literature and Gentility in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982); D. Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680–1830* (London, 1961), pp. 40–63; R. Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 16–44.

[4] V. Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic Languages* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 1–68.

reanimation of one's history. And there was nowhere else more – to coin a phrase, the needed contrary of "history-less people" – "history-ful" than the Scotland of Sir Walter Scott.'[5]

Other scholars, most notably Christopher Harvie and the late Marinell Ash, have more directly addressed the intellectual and cultural dimensions of the non-appearance of a vigorous Scottish nationalism in the nineteenth century. Harvie argued that the Union's 'unique balance of assimilation and autonomy' was paralleled in the formation of a divided Scottish intelligentsia which was torn between native and cosmopolitan loyalties; it also had a tendency to provincial self-doubt not shared by the intellectual leaders of other ethnic groups in Europe who were separated by language from metropolitan or imperial culture.[6] Harvie's work is penetrating and full of insights, but lacks the detailed groundwork on eighteenth-century intellectual life necessary for his thesis about such a stark cultural division to convince.

In *The Strange Death of Scottish History*, Ash suggests a different, and more nuanced, interpretation of the divided Scottish intellect. According to Ash, nineteenth-century Scots did not simply don the mantle of British imperialism, but abandoned the Scottish past as a meaningful history and adopted the English 'nationalism' of whiggish constitutional history at a time when the common European experience was the romantic revival of national histories. Ironically this capitulation of mid- and late nineteenth-century Scots to an Anglo-British interpretation of history followed what Ash believed to have been the great age of Scottish historiography, the early nineteenth century, when interest in the Scottish past had been stimulated by Sir Walter Scott and by the appearance of a number of historical clubs devoted to publishing Scottish documents. Ash concluded that the Disruption of the Kirk (1843), and the ensuing turmoil in Scotland's universities and in her intellectual life generally, had played an important part in the mysterious decline of the Scottish nation's confidence and interest in its own history. The Scottish past became associated with its 'emotional trappings' – the local colour and romance, for instance, of Mary, Queen of Scots or of

[5] Nairn, *Break-up of Britain*, p. 144.

[6] C. Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics 1707–1977* (London, 1977), pp. 16–17, 122–3.

Jacobites – and English history with the high seriousness of constitutional evolution.[7] Evidence for such a restricted use of the Scottish past must dent Nairn's confidence that Scotland's possession of 'a cast of national heroes and martyrs, popular tales and legends of oppression and resistance' could be crudely equated with a strong historiographical platform for a nationalist movement.[8] Indeed, much of this superficially glorious history was, according to David Craig, 'so coarse and violent and its mark so deeply felt' that it had had to be 'disowned or censored away' by Scotland's embarrassed eighteenth-century provincial elite. The relationship of the nation's history to Scottish identity was not as straightforward as Nairn believes.[9]

The Gellner thesis rests on the notion that national consciousness is a modern phenomenon. Another sociologist, Anthony Smith, has qualified this viewpoint, arguing that while nationalism is modern, there were genuine ethnocentric ideologies of long historic lineage available to nineteenth-century intellectuals as a basis for constructing their industrial-age nationalisms.[10] This is particularly relevant to the study of Scottish and English identities. While many of the nations of Europe rediscovered or renewed their ethnocentrisms in the course of the nineteenth century, both Scotland and England had enjoyed lively ethnocentric identities based on history, religion and conceptions of freedom, on a continuous basis long before the nineteenth century. Many of the phenomena associated with the nineteenth-century revival of nations, particularly pride in the national past, were part of the common currency of early modern Scottish and English political and historical discourse.

The English form of this ideology is known to historians as 'whiggism' – though its tenets were not confined to whigs, and long predated the invention of the term, whose origins, ironically, lie in mid-seventeenth-century Scottish presbyterian

[7] M. Ash, *The Strange Death of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1980), pp. 10, 149. See also J. Dwyer, R. A. Mason and A. Murdoch (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982), Introduction, pp. 1–3; M. Fry, 'The Whig Interpretation of Scottish History', in I. Donnachie and C. Whatley (eds.), *The Manufacture of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1992).

[8] Nairn, *Break-up of Britain*, p. 106.

[9] Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People*, p. 49.

[10] A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986); see also J. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982).

dissensions. Nevertheless the constituent elements of this national ideology – pride in the special role in history of the English church; belief in an 'ancient constitution' in the distant past and the subsequent unbroken continuity of limited monarchy, parliament and the rule of the common law throughout England's history; and the consequent belief in a providential missionary role for the English in world history whether as exporters of protestantism or parliamentary democracy – are best comprehended by the umbrella concept of whiggism or the English whig interpretation of history.[11] Many of these concepts are still operative in the modern vocabulary of Anglo-Britishness, and have been recently joined in the whig compound by a more sophisticated socioeconomic thesis, an updated Gothicism, which attributes to northwestern Europe, and particularly to England, the long historic possession of the customs and manners requisite for sustained economic growth – a 'culture of capitalism'.[12]

Whig ideals remain at the core of English national consciousness, and 'whiggism', broadly conceived in its non-partisan sense, is recognised as a viable intellectual scheme for organising a study of English national identity. However, it has not been deployed in tackling such problems as why a more comprehensive notion of 'Britishness' failed to supplant a whiggish conception of Englishness (or eventually of Anglo-Britishness) in post-1707 political culture. Nor, despite the structural similarities in early modern Scottish and English national mythologies, has it been applied to the study of post-Union Scottish identity.

This study attempts to suggest answers to the problems outlined above – of the retarded formation and non-formation of Scottish and British national identities – by addressing what might at first sight appear an unrelated question: how was Scotland's powerful whig historical ideology affected by the Union of 1707? Why did Scottish whiggism, which, like the English, embodied its sense of freedom in a powerful national historiography, prove less durable than its southern variant? How did Scottish and English whig ideologies, with their entrenched national historical myths,

[11] H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931); Butterfield, *The Englishman and his History* (Cambridge, 1944).

[12] A. Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford, 1978); Macfarlane, *The Culture of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1987).

interact in the new political culture created by the establishment of a united British state? This book examines the failure of two similar 'whiggisms', Scottish and English; each celebrating its own domestic revolution of 1688–9 within the scheme of a national history of freedom, and each sharing a commitment to protestantism, to fuse into a British whiggism formed from both national components. This question also raises a larger issue: the nature of the ideological defence of the British constitution in the course of the eighteenth century, a topic of daunting scope to which this study can of necessity make but a small contribution.

Most of the book is devoted to the question, so far neglected by historians, of what had happened after the Union of 1707 to Scotland's distinctive whig-presbyterian ideology. Some historians, most notably Duncan Forbes, have examined the intellectual refurbishment of the English whig tradition by the 'sceptical' and 'scientific' whigs of the Scottish Enlightenment, who considered the vulgar myths of English whig history in the light both of their sceptical Scottish detachment from the subject and of the insights of an embryonic social and political science.[13] However, no one has investigated the domestic transformation of the Scottish whig tradition, whose classic expression was to be found in the historical politics of the sixteenth-century humanist George Buchanan, into a sociological and Anglo-British mode of historical politics during the Scottish Enlightenment. The implications of this Anglo-British scientific whiggism for Scottish national identity are examined, with the hope of shedding light from an eighteenth-century vantage point on the dissolution of Scottish historical confidence in the nineteenth century.

By concentrating on the role of whig historical traditions in shaping national consciousness, this study also attempts to redirect the study of Scottish national identity away from an anachronistic post-romantic emphasis on language and the arts, towards an approach rooted in the concerns of the eighteenth-century Scottish political nation and literati, many of which now seem somewhat antiquarian, esoteric and unrelated to the concerns of modern Scottish nationalism.

[13] D. Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975); Forbes, 'Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce and Liberty', in A. S. Skinner and T. Wilson (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1975).

It is important to establish from the outset that the sense of the term 'whig' employed in this study is not narrowly partisan. Contemporaries found it necessary to construct complex taxonomies of political allegiance to explain the workings of politics. For example, these might include making fine distinctions between those 'for the Revolution by principle' and those 'for the Revolution by interest',[14] as well as considering a number of other personal factors bearing on the group identity of a politician. Since national identity rather than the fine nuances of factional manœuvre is at the core of the argument, I have taken the liberty, building on the work of Herbert Butterfield, Duncan Forbes, John Burrow and J. G. A. Pocock, to define whig historical principles in very broad terms.[15] 'Whiggism' in this book refers to those many different interpretations of the history of liberty advanced during the eighteenth century by the 'varieties of whigs' operating within the broad church of Revolution culture. There is, however, some overlap between whiggism as, very loosely, the national ideologies of post-Reformation England and Scotland, and, in its more restricted sense, as a set of partisan principles which developed on the basis of a celebratory interpretation of the Revolution of 1688–9. There were also important differences between Scottish and English whig identities, as well as shared characteristics. I have made no attempt to confine within a tight category a term capable of multiple definitions. I hope, as a result, by exploiting the vagueness of political identities and the incongruence of Scottish and English whiggisms, to shed some northern light on the cross-party ideological appropriations which were such a puzzling feature of eighteenth-century historical politics. However the sense in which 'whig' is being used should in most cases be clear from the context of the discussion.

Jacobites and tories are, of course, always identified as such. Problems arise only at the unorthodox fringes of whig political culture. For example, I identify among a new set of whig historians emerging from the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume and

[14] *A Selection from the Papers of the Earls of Marchmont* (3 vols., London, 1831), III. 449–51.

[15] Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*; J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), see esp. p. 2; Forbes, 'Sceptical Whiggism'; J. G. A. Pocock, 'The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform', in Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge, 1985).

William Robertson. Hume's *History of Britain* was widely attacked as a tory apology for the Stuarts, and both Hume and Robertson were denounced as 'tories' by Gilbert Stuart, who saw himself as the keeper of the true flame of traditional Scottish whiggism. Robertson was the father of the Moderate party in the mid-eighteenth-century Kirk and was unquestionably a whig; however, by the vicissitudes of party labelling in church and state, the Moderates were in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries known as tories. Hume is a more difficult figure to place, and he teases the historian with the numerous enigmatic references to whigs and tories in his writings. For instance, Hume admitted that his 'views of things' were 'more conformable to whig principles', his 'representations of persons to tory prejudices'. Moreover, Hume distinguished between religious whigs and political whigs: he preferred political whigs to religious whigs, political whigs to political tories, and even religious tories to religious whigs.[16] Hume was opposed to the destructive religious zeal and fanaticism which he associated with the religious whiggery of the presbyterian tradition, yet he was no tory malcontent. Rather Hume was an impartial spectator of partisan conflict, though his moderation and desire for political stability meant that he was, in effect, a defender of the established whig order.

Hume's distinction between religious and political whigs also throws into relief one of the major problems in writing about Scottish whig ideology. In Scotland, whiggism had a primary meaning associated with religion, and support for the presbyterian Kirk, but was in post-Revolution political culture soon applied also to a set of lay constitutional ideas which were, certainly after the mid-century collapse of Jacobitism, separable from the complementary ecclesiastical values.

Though one would never identify him as a whig, Sir Walter Scott is also included in this study. He is another major writer whose politics the historian finds difficult to label properly. Scott was a 'tory' in the restricted early nineteenth-century sense of the label. The eighteenth-century tory party had disintegrated sometime

[16] David Hume, *Letters* (ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols., Oxford, 1932), i. 237; [Hume], *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart Esq., late Lord Provost of Edinburgh* (London, 1748), pp. 48–50. For criticisms of Hume's *History* as tory, see e.g., Daniel McQueen, *Letters on Mr. Hume's* History of England (Edinburgh, 1756); Joseph Towers, *Observations on Hume's* History (1778).

between 1757 and the late 1760s. Scott's practical political allegiance was to ministries dominated by the Pittites, whose origins lay in the factional fragmentation of whiggery in the reign of George III, but who, because their Foxite opponents had laid claim to be the exclusive continuation of the whig party, came in time to be denominated tories.[17] Scott did refer to his own 'tory principles', but Lord Cockburn (1779–1854) urged caution in deciphering the Scottish 'toryism' of this era: 'It seldom implies anything with us except a dislike of popular institutions; and even this chiefly on grounds of personal advantage. A pure historical and constitutional tory is a very rare character in this country.'[18] However, Scott did also express sentimental Jacobite attitudes, and he was a convert from presbyterianism to episcopalianism, which was in Scotland historically linked to Jacobite politics. Nevertheless, Scott's historical novels and miscellaneous essays on social, political and historical topics were deeply indebted to the sociological whig ideology of the Scottish Enlightenment,[19] and from 1803 to 1807 he contributed to the journal of educated whiggery, the *Edinburgh Review*. Above all, Scott used the potential ambiguity inherent in the form of the historical novel as a way of undermining the stark mythologies, and reconciling the long-held prejudices, of whigs and tories.

[17] For party terminology, see R. Willman, 'The Origins of Whig and Tory in English Political Language' *HJ* 17 (1974), 247–64. For the problems of separating party identity from the rhetorical strategies of politicians, see J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 39–54; I. R. Christie, 'Was There a New Toryism in the Earlier Part of George III's Reign?', in Christie, *Myth and Reality in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Politics* (London, 1970); J. C. D. Clark, 'A General Theory of Party, Opposition and Government, 1688–1832', *HJ* 23 (1980), 295–325; B. Lenman, *Integration, Enlightenment and Industrialization: Scotland 1746–1832* (London, 1981), pp. 155–6; M. Peters, '"Names and Cant": Party Labels in English Political Propaganda c. 1755–65', *Parliamentary History* 3 (1984), 103–27; P. Langford, 'Old Whigs, Old Tories and the American Revolution', in P. Marshall and G. Williams (eds.), *The British Atlantic Empire before the American Revolution* (London, 1980); Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 356–7. But see also B. W. Hill, *British Parliamentary Parties 1742–1832* (London, 1985), which makes a case for the continuity of whig and tory identities.

[18] Scott to George Ellis, 26 May 1805, in H. J. C. Grierson (ed.), *Letters of Sir Walter Scott* (12 vols., London, 1932–7), I. 254; Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of His Time* (ed. K. C. F. Miller, Chicago, 1974). p. 74.

[19] I have used the term 'sociological whig' throughout for the ideology of the Scottish Enlightenment, in preference to Duncan Forbes's 'scientific whig'; the former is more descriptive of the new content of whig historiography, and is, in my opinion (I know colleagues who disagree), less redolent of modern social science.

It should be evident that it is very easy to lapse into a scholasticism of partisan identification, a fascinating and, of course, necessary discipline, but one which can at times obscure, for our purposes, the significance of historical arguments in the development of a national Scottish historiography to which historians of many shades of political and religious commitment contributed. I have attempted to maintain a balance between a due attention to partisan identification where possible or useful, and a desire to let the manifold ideological configurations generated within the broad, flexible and elusive parameters of whiggism reveal themselves in the course of the narrative.